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# Womens Voice

# WOMEN'S VOICE 5

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## Contents

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- News 3
- What Your Best Friend Won't Tell You 6
- Whose Health Service 7
- Nurses Must Fight Back 8
- Nurses Do Join Unions 9
- Strike While the Freeze is Cold 10
- Unite & Fight—Housewives Demonstrate 11
- Marion Robin, 69 and still fighting 12
- The Big Red Herring
- Clay Cross—the Real Test 13
- Review—Women Fight Back 14
- Letters 15

## Editorial

On Friday, 2 February a Bill to end discrimination against women was debated in the House of Commons. Similar Bills have been debated on six occasions since 1968, and yet still no vote was taken. The present Bill would make illegal discrimination against women in education, training and employment, and would set up an anti-discrimination board. The opposition to the Bill from the Tory benches was not as blatant as last year when the Tory spokesman said that most British women positively enjoy being discriminated against! This time Tory MP Ronald Bell stated that women have rights already, and when reminded of the hundreds of militant women meeting at that moment at Caxton Hall, he felt that no sane woman in the country would listen to them.

Saved by a Select Committee!

On Wednesday, 14 February, the Bill got an unopposed second reading, and was submitted to a Select Committee which could 'iron out' the defects, Willie Hamilton (Labour) saw this as a delaying tactic by the government, and in fact there is still no definite date for the Bill to become law. Shirley Williams, chief Labour spokesman for the Bill, said during the first reading, that it *must* become law, and gave as an example of discrimination the fact that now, a woman must reveal to her husband any income she receives from stocks and shares, whereas he does not legally have to do so. If that was all we had to worry about we'd be laughing! We cannot be convinced, from statements like that, that the Bill, if passed, will improve our lives. The words of Audrey Wise, official of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) speaking to the women at Caxton Hall on 2 February, were more realistic,

'Don't rely on the Bill—if passed, it will not be worth anything beyond the struggle we put behind it.'

The construction of the Bill is in fact very similar to that of the Race Relations Act, and there are only too many examples of how ineffective that is. Such laws can only be successfully used by those who really understand legal procedure. Most working women have neither the time or the experience to take employers to court for discrimination.

Equal Pay

Another point against the Bill, again by Ronald Bell, was that women already have an Equal Pay Act, so why do they need this as well? The only thing the Equal Pay Act has done is to show us just how little to rely on Parliament to give women

equality. It has so many loopholes for employers to use, and we have just learnt that various employers associations are sending out notes to their members giving them guidance on how to avoid equal pay. They advise job grading, segregating female workers, and keeping the unskilled *male* rate as low as possible—brothers—it's your fight too!

An Act which allows such devious interpretation is worse than no Act.

### Parliament is not the Answer

We cannot afford to rely on Parliament to achieve equality for women in our society. It is in the interest of the government that employers should keep profits UP (so keeping women's wages and opportunities DOWN), and also that the majority of women should keep quiet, working hard to keep their families fed and healthy whilst coping with the problems of rising prices and rents. Part of their way of doing this is to keep women's rising anger at bay with Acts of Parliament—but Acts that have so many loopholes that their effect is minimal.

This is insulting; it imagines firstly that women can't see through these shams, and secondly that when eventually we don't receive the equal pay we expected, or are still being discriminated against, we won't have the initiative to organise collectively against them. We must prove them wrong!

If women are still in any doubt as to the concern that this government, (or the Labour government before it) has for women we can look at the extra burdens they imposed on us with the extra NHS charges; with the 'Fair Rent' Act; with the freeze on wages and on our move to equal pay; with their unwillingness to give us free contraception and abortion, and with their present inability to control prices. If a government is unwilling and unable to deal with these BASIC issues that affect women so fundamentally, then we can have little confidence in the great speeches that accompany the Anti-Discrimination Bill and the Equal Pay Act before it.

### We Must Act Now!

We must publicly expose both the Equal Pay Act and the Anti-Discrimination Bill, and then organise ourselves to fight for the kind of equality we want, and that's not the equality which allows us to keep secret our income from stocks and shares! For working class women, equality with our men would be a victory, but NOT a paradise—it would mean equal exploit-

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ation, equal shift work, equally bad conditions, equal levels of unemployment and equally bad housing. Real equality won't be achieved until working class women fight alongside working class men for a society where the majority of the people—the working class, both men and women, have control. Women must start organising NOW to take their full part in this struggle.

# News

## French elections- the women's role

France has a general election on 4 March and 11 March. For the first time for years there will be revolutionary workers' candidates on the first round all over the country. Of particular interest to Women's Voice readers is the campaign of the revolutionaries of Lutte Ouvriere (Workers' Struggle). Not only are they putting forward only workers as their candidates but they are making a special point of raising the problems of working women. Out of 171 candidates there are 47 women all working-class. This is almost twice the number of the Communist Party, the main 'left' party with 28 women out of 473 candidates. It is almost as many as all the big parties put together.

In fact Lutte Ouvriere's main election 'spokesman' is a working woman. Arlette Laguiller is a clerk in the big Paris bank the Credit Lyonnais. She is a leading trade unionist and played a major part in getting the workers in the bank to join in the great strikes of May 1968. As part of the election build-up the television did a programme on Arlette and her group. But they couldn't show the most important part of her life and her politics—the Credit Lyonnais wouldn't let the cameras in to show the basements where thousands of workers spend 8 hours a day, 5 days a week in artificial light, the creche with 60 places for several thousand women and so on. So they decided to film workers going in. But they turned up without any lighting. The television 'experts' just hadn't thought of the fact that millions of people go to work while it is still dark!

Lutte Ouvriere's campaign points out how women are the worst paid section of workers, how they are trained for low-paid jobs, how they meet prejudice. The 'Left' parties only talk about a minimum wage of £20 a week—not about equal job opportunities, about more creches—but when? What they never talk about is the wider oppression of women. The Communist Party-controlled women's trade union paper has as much on knitting, fashion and how to 'keep your man happy' as any middle-class glossy magazine—it's message was sarcastically summed up by Arlette as 'forget your long day's work, when you get home you can make yourself as lovely as the boss's wife.' Lutte Ouvriere points out that working women are condemned to a double working-day. They also take up issues that the 'Left' parties are too

respectable to fight on: Abortion is still illegal in France, but of course the rich can go to clinics abroad. Lutte Ouvriere fights for free abortion on demand.

But Lutte Ouvriere also points out that middle-class 'Women's Lib' won't solve the problems of working-class women. The only women can win their fight is by being part of the revolutionary working-class movement. Lutte Ouvriere won't get many votes. But their campaign will be one of the few ways the voice of working men and women can be heard during this election.



## GLC tenants on strike

The GLC-controlled Haggerston estate is one of those desolate expanses of brick and concrete that were deemed fit to house workers in round about the 1930s. As you walk round this drab grey-brown environment, you notice that half the windows of the ground-floor flats have been boarded up, to protect them against vandalism. It is the sort of place, where, as one woman pointed out to me, it is difficult to get to know people. Even the young wives who stay at home all day feel isolated from each other. There is nowhere decent for the children to play. The dismal surroundings seem to provide a barrier to the development of any sort of community.

Recently, however, the tenants from the worst block on the estate—Richardson House, decided that they had had enough. The result was an almost solid two week rent strike, sparked off by the appalling conditions in Mr and Mrs Golding's flat. This couple had been forced, because of the damp, to move all their belongings into one small room which they were sharing with their two small children. The GLC had been informed, time and time again but had failed to do anything about it. The problem is as the other tenants know only too well, that the entire block is unfit for habitation and it is therefore pointless trying to patch up the individual flats. In any case the flats are much too cramped; the baths are squeezed into the cupboard-like kitchens. There is only one electric point in each flat and where these have broken the electricity workers refuse to repair them because the whole wiring system is too dangerous. But the worst problem is the damp. For example Mrs O'Connor took me into her newly papered flat, at first sight spruce and smart, that is until you notice the musty smell and she shows you the sodden, rotting carpet behind the bed. Mrs O'Connor has had pleurisy because of it, her friend Mrs Armstrong has had it three times. Tenants all over the estate will tell you similar stories.

The recent rent-strike may at last have got them some attention. If yet another promise from the council to re-house them could be counted as attention! The local Labour MP, Ron Brown, turned up to the last meeting to try and impress the tenants with stories of how much he had been doing to help. But the meeting, consisting mostly of the women on the estate, took care to stress that if anything was at long last to be done, it was only because of the solidarity and the militancy they had shown. They agreed to pay their rent but at the same time to send an ultimatum to the council stating that if repairs were not carried out within a month they would withhold their rent again and consider further action.

The most important lesson they seemed to have drawn from the experience was the need for unity. There were repeated calls to keep the meetings going and an action committee was formed. There are still a lot of problems they will have to face, not the least of them being that they could be re-housed only to find out, like many tenants all over the country, that with the Tory rent rises, a flat fit to live in is more than they can afford.

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# Swansea- pollution threat

Port Tennant is a working class area of Swansea, huddled against the slopes of Kilvey Hill and bounded by the polluted River Tawe on the west, Swansea Docks on the south, and the Crymlyn Bog on the east side.

Each year, some 200-300 tons of tar, unburnt fuel oil, and ash falls on Port Tennant. The ash comes mainly from the Sir John power station—it is dry and can easily be dusted from window-sills. The greasy, black soot which sticks to windows, doors, clothes, furniture, and carpets, is a different matter—it cannot be dusted off. It comes from the factory of United Carbon Black, a company which has been making Carbon black in Swansea since 1945. What it means for the people of Port Tennant, particularly the women, is that when the wind blows from the east (mainly in winter) anything and everything in Port Tennant is covered by a thin film of the muck—clothes cannot be dried in the open air, windows cannot be left open, children have to be washed several times to get the muck off.

Local housewives have been complaining about this pollution on and off for the last 20 years, but local councillors have shown a marked lack of interest. They were raised from their lethargy in 1970 when angry women dumped their dirty washing in the middle of the Council Chamber. In January and February 1971, the women blocked the road to the factory for 24 days and nights, and got assurances from the company that they would spend £200,000 putting things right and that an extension which would have increased production by 25 per cent would not be built.

Yet things have got no better. In January of this year, at a stormy meeting of local residents, calls were made for the re-siting of the factory in an area away from housing. At the moment the Department of Trade and Industry is investigating this—it is likely to cost £3.5 million, but most of

that would be paid either directly by the government or be recovered in development grants.

One of the main problems at the moment is the lack of contact between the local residents and the men who work in the factory. This is partly because only a handful of local people work at United Carbon Black. It is mainly due to the company itself. It admits that it is the main cause of pollution in the area, but claims that its emissions are within the limits laid down by the 'Alkali Inspectorate'. At the same time the company have used the protest to raise the question of unemployment with the workers—if the protests go on, they claim, the works will have to close. By setting the workers against the women, successfully for the moment, the company are having the heat taken off them—the fact that they pollute, and the fact that the Alkali limits are too low are obscured by clashes between the women and the workers on the factory gate. The artificial barriers which have been created quite cynically between the women and the workers have to be broken down. The next few months will see if they succeed or fail.

Bryan Rees

## Let them eat beans

The latest attempt to cut down government aid to the cost of school meals is at best ingenious. At worst it is yet another attack on workers' living standards.

The Daily Mirror of 20 January printed a report of a secret experiment in which meat substitute made from 'spun' beans was being used in school dinners instead of increasingly expensive meat.

Of course Courtauld's, the company who sponsored the experiment, deny that any risk to the children was involved. Nevertheless, no-one was consulted before the school kids were used in the experiment—neither the kids, nor parents nor teachers. The National Union of Teachers, on dis-

covery of the experiment, have raised a strong protest: 'We are absolutely against secret experiments on schoolchildren.' The firm defends the secrecy because they 'did not want prejudiced opinions'.

Whatever the eventual proven merits or demerits of the kind of new meat substitute foods, there are certain points for concern. Why is it that school children are being used? We have heard a lot lately in the press about the lowering of standards of the nutritional content in the average school dinner. This is worrying. Many mothers depend on school dinners to give their children at least one square meal a day.

The problem is that food prices have risen and school cooks have to manage dinners on more or less the same budget—so something has to go. Rather than increase the subsidy to school dinners the government will look for other ways out. Cheap substitute meats are obviously part of the solution for them.

Of course these foods may be perfectly harmless and good, but we must be aware that the real reason for their popularity with the government is that they would provide cheap proteins for the working class, while the rich go on eating their roast beef!

The fact is, there could be enough meat in the country for all of us to eat it every day. Masses of food is destroyed, for example, each year millions of tons of wheat are burnt in the USA because they cannot get a 'good' price for it. Meantime people STARVE. The same sort of thing goes for meat—the farmers don't make enough profit out of meat, so not enough is produced. Most workers cannot now afford to pay the so-called 'economic' price of meat anyway, so we have a meat crisis.

Maybe one day we will need to produce alternative foods, but we must decide this. It must be a choice made when we really know what all the alternatives are, and we won't be using young kids as guinea-pigs.

## Whose obedient servant?

It was a strange sight to see several thousand Civil Servants—predominantly female—marching down Whitehall one January evening shouting such slogans as 'Heath Out'. Yet this is what happened on 10 January after a meeting of approximately 6000 Civil and Public Services Association members at the Central Hall. Mr Heath's prices and incomes policy will go down in history—if for nothing else—for provoking the first ever strike in the British Civil Service.

Women account for approximately 40 per cent of the non-industrial Civil Service, and 85 per cent of these are in Clerical, typing or analogous grades—that is to say, the low paid areas. Although equal pay exists in the Civil Service, it is interesting to note that the New Earnings Survey figure for April 1972 gives an average of £28.20 p.w. for the earnings of male clerical grades, as opposed to £23.10 p.w. for female.

Given that the pay freeze and subsequent pay policy are based on the principle of robbing the poor to salvage the economy of the rich, it is always the lowest paid

Striking Civil Servants in London on 27 February



workers that suffer most. In the Civil Service—as in most other areas—women represent a very high proportion of the low paid, 80 per cent of Civil Service Clerical Assistants—over 50,000—are women. At the maximum of their scale their pay is £21.60 p.w. The increase of around 20 per cent that they were due to get in January of this year would have given them a rise of between £4 and £4.50. The pay policy means they will be lucky to get about £1.50-£2.00 in April.

The women in the Civil Service are well aware that this sort of money does not even cover the rise in the cost of living; rather than being a damper on militancy in the Civil Service—as they have often been accused of—women are very much in the vanguard of the present struggle against the government.

## Students support women workers

Pickets were out at the University of Warwick in January during a one week strike by members of the Transport and General Workers' Union. The workers, including all the women cleaners and catering staff, were demanding a £2.40 increase in their weekly wage. Most of them had never been on strike before.

Conditions for the university workers have always been very poor, and until now they haven't had a union organisation capable of taking on their bosses—the university administration. The women cleaners, for example, work in different buildings spread out over an area one mile long, so it has been difficult for them to call union meetings. Indeed, it was forbidden for them to meet in working hours, and there was no accepted procedure for them to negotiate with the university.

The last straw came this Autumn. Previously, the university had stretched their earnings to those of corporation workers doing similar jobs. However, when the corporation workers got a £2.40 increase this summer, the university did a quick about-turn, and refused to pay up. With prices galloping ever upwards in the shops, many workers felt that their real wages had effectively been cut. As Mrs Bernadette Jones, union branch secretary said, 'The money in our pay packets is buying less and less. And each week that goes by, the situation gets worse.'

The university, in a typical two-faced way, said they had every sympathy, but the terms of the freeze prevented them from paying the new rate. In fact, this was not true, since a specific government order would have been necessary to stop them.

In this stale-mate situation, the T&G shop stewards decided on strike action, and they were backed by a committee representing all the unions at Warwick. Best support of all came from the students union. At the request of the shop stewards, they occupied their social building, and ran it as the strike HQ. They provided everything from cups of tea to giant placards. Very quickly, most sections of the university were shut down; doors were locked; lectures boycotted, and delivery trucks were turned away.

Registry officials responded by calling in the Department of Employment, and after five days of the strike, it became clear that a government order would be made, and

the 270 workers would face the stony wall of the Freeze legislation. It was obvious that they could not fight and win on their own. However, it was also clear that through their militant action they were in a good position to bargain for a number of important things. So, in spite of a union official's attempt to herd them quietly back to work, the strikers marched up to the registry and made the university concede the following points:

- 1 A redefinition of contracts, so that each worker has clearly defined duties.
- 2 A formal and written agreement to link their scale of wages to that of corporation workers.
- 3 A bonus for extra work caused by the build up of dirt during the strike.
- 4 The right to hold union meetings on campus in working time.
- 5 Freedom of operation for shop stewards.

Mrs Jones said that the university's treatment of the workers had been 'diabolical'. But with a stronger organisation, and with the experience they have gained, the workers have emerged from the strike more able to defend and improve their conditions. They still aim to get that £2.40 and more. And as for the husbands of the women strikers and occupiers, Mrs Frances Abbey, T&G shop steward summed it up. 'They're all for it,' she said.

## The rise of the lowly underpaid

Chanie Rosenberg, Secretary, NUT, Hackney

One might be forgiven for thinking that the first angry roar against the wage freeze would be led by the big battalions of the working class—engineers, miners, dockers. But it is no accident that the lowly underpaid public servants, with a possible majority of so-called 'backward' women, have risen off their knees. While the big battalions can often smash through the barriers of restraint and freeze, the Government's obedient servants could not. So the Government rubs this in, and slaps the other cheek hard. But they have done so just once too often.

Once risen to their full height these workers see an awful lot they can't see from below: the connection between the fight for wages and the fight against the Government—their employer—their weak economic strength, thence the need to unite with others fighting the same battle.

So the moderate NUT, Civil Servants Union, NUPE, called a joint meeting of over 30 public service unions at top level to discuss joint action. Result: as yet little more than a gesture. In London, where teachers are out on strike; where civil servants, gas workers, hospital workers and others are out, links between the local union branches at both secretarial and shop steward level are being made, initiated in many instances by the NUT, the weakest economically, but now more experienced in strikes than many others.

Activity is being based around joint part or whole day stoppages for local demonstrations, common leaflets for the public, joint approaches to other unions for solidarity action, particularly industrial unions whose economic strength can make all the difference between success and defeat.

It is early yet to predict the outcome in unofficial or at most semi-official action, as some unions, like the Civil Servants', are new even to official action. But the seed of solidarity, of breaking out of narrow trade-unionism which isolates (and weakens) different sections of workers, of politics, has been sown in fertile ground.

The Rank and File organisations in the different unions—strong in the NUT and growing fast in others like the CPSA, and NALGO, have been crucial in making the connections and winning the rank and file memberships to militancy which the official union leaderships have then been forced to recognise.

The march forward will not be without retreats and disappointments, but it is on, and growing in size and determination.

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Extract from 'Regional Survey: The Midlands', in *The Economist*, 16.12.72, p29. Nottingham

Nottingham lacks the acquisitive drive of the West Midlands. Its wage rates are still below the national average . . . Unemployment is no real problem, even though 3.2 per cent of the labour force is out of work (5.2 per cent for men and 1.2 per cent for women). There is, in fact, almost a permanent shortage of women workers, and even today nearly 40 per cent of its 264,000 strong workforce is composed of women. *This has helped to encourage a tolerant and sensible moderation in industrial relations locally, and strikes are rare.*

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# What your best friend won't tell you...

If you were a businessman and you wanted to invest in a sure thing, what would you choose? Remember, you don't have to have any particular interest in the product, just so long as it will bring you the fastest and biggest profit.

Reckitt and Colman, a firm who already had the mustard market tied up, were recently faced with just this problem. And they came up with a fantastically profitable answer. It's called 'Freshette', and it's a vaginal deodorant, though it prefers to be called an 'intimate spray'.

Of course, Reckitt and Colman are not the only people to have jumped onto this particular band-wagon. Since the vaginal deodorant industry has a staggering annual growth rate of 70 per cent, and since it's worth about £2 million a year, that band-wagon is a pretty crowded place. No doubt when the first deformed children are born as a proven result of these sprays, the manufacturers will stampede just as fast to proclaim their innocence.

You see, there is one snag in this industry, for those who like to keep their exploitation above board. The fact is that these sprays contain some very dangerous chemicals. They don't say so on the container, and there is no legal requirement for them to do so. On the contrary, many of the sprays bear the words 'medically approved' and 'safe'.

One such chemical ingredient goes by the name of hexachlorophane. It is used in cosmetics as a preservative. And it is used in deodorants such as Boots' 'Family Deodorant Spray', and Max Factor's equivalent. These 'family sprays' also bear no warning of their lethal contents, though in fact they should never be used on babies or children.

Already it is known, from tests on rats, that even small amounts of hexachlorophane absorbed from a pregnant woman's bloodstream, can damage the brain of her unborn child. In larger quantities, the effects are likely to become visible in deformities like those produced by Thalidomide. Even facial cosmetics like Natural Wonder Night Treatment (Revlon) and Pure Magic Medicated Liquid Make-Up, and the skin cleanser Phisohex are dangerous for this reason. But when hexachlorophane is sprayed directly onto the vaginal area it is absorbed and will enter the bloodstream much more quickly.

Of course, it is possible to make these things without using hexachlorophane, and a lot of manufacturers are now patting themselves on the back, and declaring their products 'hexachlorophane free'. Some of them have since taken the precaution of keeping their 'new ingredient' a secret. There is no reason to believe that any new ingredient has been tested more than the first, if indeed it is fundamentally different.

The fact is that the market and the lure of profits is far too strong to stop these people poisoning us. No government regulations cover the testing of cosmetic products, and there is no legal requirement for the ingredients to be listed. Even if there were such regulations, far too much would still depend on the goodwill of people whose only interest is profit—people like the bosses of the Distillers Co., who gave us Thalidomide.

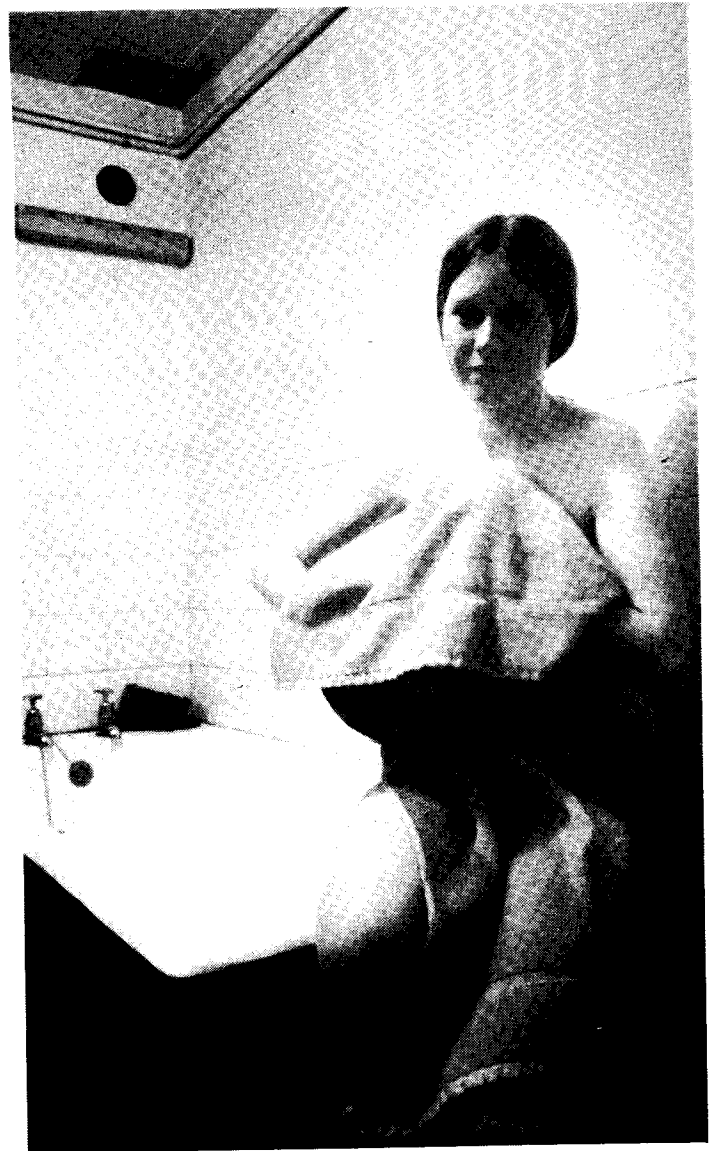
Unfortunately the market is already primed. Women were made to feel ashamed of their bodies long before the ad-men dreamed up their special brand of hints and innuendos. What they tell you is, in a word, that you smell, and no man will want you unless you try to cover the fact. Men, incidentally, also smell, and the ad-men had a go at promoting genital deodorants. Unfortunately for them, this time, men are not so primed into despising their own bodies, and, as the jargon goes, the market proved resistant. Meanwhile, an estimated 22 per cent of women between the ages of 16 and 24 have been conned, and their secret fears exploited. Women's Liberation has tried very hard to make women aware of this simple fact but the ad-man has centuries of repression on his side.

In Italy in the seventeenth century, a face cream sold to women killed six hundred of their husbands. It was made of liquid arsenic. The Duchess of Newcastle advised women of her class to burn off their old skins with oil of vitriol in order that hopeful new skins could grow instead. Other women have had

their skin cut and stretched to remove wrinkles; they have bathed in their own urine; and they have made lipstick a boom industry even through the years of the slump.

Perhaps it sounds funny, some of the things women have felt they needed to do in order to catch and hold their men. But then think how vital it is to us, when we cannot earn a wage sufficient to keep ourselves. Finding a man still is for most women the only way to live. And this will go on being true until we get rid of Helena Rubinstein, multi-millioness, and the system that supports her. But let's not forget Reckitt and Colman and the rest, wondering what to do with all their spare capital. And let's not forget the reason they want us to smell so uniformly sweet—the most foul-smelling of all reasons—profit.

Judith Condon



'Bathing every day is better for you.'

I quote this from my doctor. I consulted him when I had thrush, and he said it was caused by using a vaginal deodorant—which destroys the normal bacteria which defend the body against this.



# WHOSE HEALTH SERVICE?

*The Health Service is one of the victories of the working class, something that our mothers and fathers fought for that we seem to take for granted as a 'good thing', but gradually people are beginning to see that, bit by bit, it is being taken away from us. Now Britain has the lowest expenditure on health of any Common Market country. We used to think of it as OUR National Health Service, but what WE want and what WE need are not considered when decisions are made about cut-backs and re-organisation . . .*

After two years working as a social worker in a hospital I have long given up feeling any pride in our great British Health Service. Though unquestioning obedience of the Matron has gone, it is being replaced by adherence to 'procedures' and 'routines'—the patient is just a cog in the great machine of efficiency. The old door-mat attitude also persists. Consultants are God and patients, cleaners, cooks and cadet nurses matter very little. My attitude has now changed to one of DISGUST.

A recent ward round began with a consultant being humbly listened to by an Indian Registrar and Houseman (Doctors who work long hours for low pay) as he was informing them that immigrants carry TB more often than English patients, the Irish being very blameworthy too. This dubious fact was not related to inadequate living conditions, but some mysterious, inherent weakness. Not a squeak of protest from the two doctors. Why? Because servility is necessary to survive as a doctor, especially if you are black.

Doctors in hospitals depend for their livelihood on the opinions of Consultants. Consultant recommendation is the only way to get promoted. How many black consultants have you seen? Consultants also decide how many of their own jobs there will be.

As they are paid, like GPs, by number of patients treated, they have a vested interest in not increasing the number of jobs, however overworked they are. And here again—who suffers? Not the private patients or the Consultants' round of golf—but the National Health patient who gets less time in the consulting room.

Because of the Registrars' resentment of the need to crawl before the Consultants there is little, if any, real co-operation between the two, and it is the patients who suffer. They are left in ignorance or confusion, severely over prescribed with drugs, or just not diagnosed because of inconsistent dabbling of three or four doctors at different levels all trying to rival each other.

Servility is also necessary for patients to survive. If you complain, you will be ignored, positively neglected or sent home. Not only do we get less time and consideration as a NHS patient but also social class can determine the way we are dealt with. On one recent ward round a Consultant shouted at many working class patients (nearly all elderly) and did not address them by name. An elderly man suffering from depression was hauled out of bed (he had not stood for three weeks) and was told to walk or end his days in a geriatric hospital with those of unsound mind! A demented man was sent home and later set fire to himself. His bed was needed for a private patient who could no longer afford the £80 a week for a private bed. BUT, on the same occasion, a middle class man was allowed twenty minutes of the Consultant's precious time.

Recently another Consultant refused to see dockers or miners—even the son of a retired docker—because their strikes 'hold the country to ransom'. Such are the attitudes of these ex-public school men who use the NHS facilities to run their private practices. The same Consultant told me 'Don't interrupt me at my private rooms, if I was at the Hospital it wouldn't matter.'

Our top doctors come from the same background as our bosses; they are therefore mostly anti-working class and often racist. They tend to have little sympathy with, or understanding of their patients and cannot talk to them humanely about such things as death and incurable disease. They hide their failings behind obscure medical terminology, lies, or callousness.

## Will it get worse?

The NHS is about to be re-organised. A purely administrative solution for the problems of the NHS has been worked out by a team of management experts. When asked if they had consulted the patients about re-organisation a member of the team replied: 'When we re-organised Glacier Metal Company we didn't ask the ball bearings they make what they thought, so why ask the patients?'

The problem of professional rivalry over status is ignored by this efficiency exercise and will continue to outweigh patients' needs. The most used words in the government's recommendations are:— 'delegation, accountability, cost-efficiency' (what does this mean in a health care service but cutting costs and staff?). The praise it gives to the role of the private sector, and Sir Keith Joseph's attempted introduction of men from the business world to 'manage' the Health Service, have even stirred our unions into opposition.

## What can be done?

Despite all handicaps of staff constantly changing shifts, and the resulting isolation, a fight back against the Health Disgrace is beginning. Ancillary workers lead the way in their fight against the freeze for decent wages. Patients did not suffer during their one day strike (well, not more than they do every day!) as emergency services came into operation. At my hospital the strike was led by women canteen workers, sick of appalling pay and staff shortages. They shamed the men into coming out with them (porters basic pay is only £19 a week).

Administrative workers threatened by re-organisation are beginning to fight back and push their undemocratic union, NALGO, to defend them.

Nurses are becoming unionised gradually and feelings are running high. Co-ordinating organisations of militants are being formed, for example, the National Alliance of Shop Stewards in the Health Service, (NASH).

## Patients Can get together?

At Hackney Hospital mothers using the maternity service have started a group to fight against the poor service—long waiting times at clinics etc (pregnant mothers see each other regularly over a period so it is easier to organise).

These groups are very important in cutting down our isolation, and workers and patients *must* link up to be effective.

Sandy Rose

# NURSES MUST FIGHT BACK

## Herma D. (Chelmsford Group Hospitals)

Nurses put up with a great deal. They work long days because of an infamous 'split-shift' system, they are overworked and even nowadays they have to tolerate vicious bullying from matron, sister and doctor. They are paid a wage so low that they are unable to live decently on their monthly salary, and if single, are economically forced to 'live in' the hospital.

Why have nurses put up with it for so long? The hierarchy of sisters and matron can claim some responsibility. They have managed to contain the massive resentment felt by nurses because it has taken no organised, collective form. Many nurses fear trade unionism and would give a 'feminine' shudder at the thought of militant action. They have been educated into apathy. They are trained to see nursing as a self-sacrificing vocation in which payment is merely an afterthought, to keep body and soul together, while the real reward lies either in 'advancing professional standards', or in the 'idea of service', or in heaven! The real satisfaction that many people get from looking after others is used against them by this kind of moral blackmail. They are turned into cheap labourers who are made to feel guilt ridden if they demand a decent life, and organise collectively to fight for this right.

Also, many nurses see themselves fundamentally as married women, dependent on their husband's pay packets. They don't see the need to improve pay and conditions in a job they hope they won't ever have to rely on.

Militant nurses, especially trainees, have always been threatened by the risk of victimisation. For instance, the so-called 'union' paper for students (SNAP) often carries anonymous letters from young trainees who dare not put a name to their letter for fear of a matron-sister vendetta against them.

## Student Nurses—Slave Labour!

Student and pupil nurses make up over 40 per cent of the nursing work force, who have to put up with appalling pay. First year nurses must live in, and many second and third years find they cannot afford to live out. The hospital matron has complete authority over the trainee nurses. She will exercise this absolute tyranny for the nurses' benefit—as she sees it! For instance, many hospitals still have the rule which forbids men from entering a nurse's room, and a lights out rule; such petty regulations may not be generally observed, but they provide a ready pretext for nailing any 'troublesome' girl.

If a student nurse fails to turn up for work then she'll be hounded by the home sister, or number seven as they're now called. This woman may well barge into your room and demand to know why you aren't at work. The nurse is then expected to see the hospital doctor who is under pressure from the matron not to issue medical certificates, especially in times of staff shortage. Recently I was hauled over the coals by the matron for having the impudence to sign on at a local GP's and then pretend I was ill after this doctor had issued me with a medical certificate! In general, if a girl is ill, then she is shirking her duty, according to the 'Nightingale' tradition. These nurses are working a full day for most of their three year courses. This means they work a minimum 40 hour week; they work compulsory night duty involving 12 hour shifts for up to six weeks; they work compulsory weekends and receive time and a quarter only after 4.30pm on a Saturday. In my hospital we are given less than one week's notice of the shifts we'll be on.

Many students become demoralised under such pressures of overwork and bad living conditions while they are studying for an exam that makes or breaks them as nurses. The failure rate for the SRN was as high as 34 per cent last year. There is a huge turn-over of trainees—one in three girls drop out of the course each year. Many nurses come from abroad, a large number from Ireland and nearly 17,000 came from Commonwealth countries in Africa, West Indies and Malaysia last year. These



nurses are allowed into the country on work permits strictly for nursing. This work permit will not be renewed at the end of the year if the nurse breaks her contract and leaves nursing. So, the coloured nurse lives in fear of being sent home if she 'makes trouble' and is sacked.

Many of these girls are dumped into training courses they never wanted. A recent report shows that one in three girls from overseas, training in psychiatric hospitals had applied for general nursing. These girls are given their work permit, and then allocated willy nilly. I, for instance, completed an SEN course without ever being told that my qualification is not recognised in Trinidad. The NHS is being allowed to use black people as cheap labour in the most callous and brutal way.

Nurses pay this appalling price in human misery and humiliation and rather than fight they usually get out. Nurses only stay in the NHS for 18 months, on average, after completing their training, and yet in chronic and geriatric hospitals there is an acute shortage of trained staff. In such hospitals four in 10 of the staff are untrained auxiliaries, while in general hospitals the figure is 15 per cent. Many trained nurses go abroad to work, and in the London area especially, they work only partly in the NHS and also privately as agency nurses where they are paid much higher rates.



But these are stop-gap solutions. In the long term nurses must combine with other health workers if we are to gain better pay and conditions. The Royal College of Nursing, whose terrorised students write the anonymous letters, is a professional association designed to advance the sectional 'craft' interests of nursing. The RCN's charter rules out trade union activity to improve pay and conditions. The College is totally undemocratic as only paid up SRN's can vote for the officers who decide policy, while the nursing workforce is made up overwhelmingly of student and pupil nurses, auxiliaries and State Enrolled nurses. The RCN makes militant sounding noises at times, but it is a dead loss; it is not a union but a professional association that remorselessly splits the workforce into competitive little groups vying over status while the living standard of the nurse steadily falls.

If nurses are to improve their pay and conditions, and regain some self respect, they must organise themselves collectively into a union which will push the common interests of hospital staff, whether they are trained nurses, students, cleaning staff or porters. They must also demand industrial action of whatever kind whenever nurses are victimised for militancy.

# NURSES DO JOIN UNIONS

## Margaret Blake

*Margaret Blake is a nurse in a mental hospital in Essex. She is a shop steward on the night shift, for male and female nurses, and during the last year has been involved in organising nursing staff into a union.*

In the hospital where I did my general training, we student nurses were completely cowed by the 19th century hierarchical system whereby getting our SRN depended on how we behaved, and what kind of reports the sister put in about us. An obvious example of what I mean is something a nurse in a well known East End General Hospital told me the other day. She tried to organise the other student nurses into the National Union of Public Employees, (NUPE) and found herself with a letter from the matron warning her that her SRN depended on her 'good behaviour', and that she would get the sack if she persisted in 'making trouble'. She needs a reference from that matron if she wishes to do her training in another hospital.

Most students, many of whom are from overseas, will put up with any conditions in order to get that precious SRN. Pay is £600-£800 a year and the rules and regulations of the nurses home are still those of the cloister. All students are strongly encouraged to join the Royal College of Nursing when in training, to give them that gloss of professional standing which they are told will stand them in good stead in their careers! There are very few male nurses in general nursing which partly explains the lack of trade union traditions amongst nursing staffs.

When I was forced to go back to nursing through lack of money, I went back to the kind of hospital in which I had first trained—a mental hospital. I had to work nights because I had two young children, and it was hell trying to sleep during the day. I joined the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE) straight away, but found membership small and inactive. I encountered dislike and resentment from one of the Superintendents who disliked me especially because I was the only one with a General Nursing qualification like herself and she was convinced that I was after her job. She accused me from the start of trying 'to seek popularity with the nurses'. She did her damnest to make me leave (she had already bullied several nurses into leaving and had reduced many a nurse to tears with her constant bullying). She reported me over trivial things and the matron suggested I leave because of this. I refused and have now been here four years. With the kids going to school I have been able to take a greater interest in union affairs and am now shop steward on night duty for both male and female staff. Together with another socialist, a male nurse,



we have increased union membership on night duty from about 40 per cent to 75 per cent in just over a year.

My biggest task as shop steward is recruiting, which has been very encouraging. I use all sorts of arguments to get the women in. Many join as a kind of insurance and in fact we were successful in fighting a case for a nurse who had been hit by a patient, in getting compensation under the Criminal Compensation Act. My approach is cajoling. I nag, nag and joke about it, but a classic case was that of a Spanish nurse who eventually joined 'just to shut me up', and when she got a pay rise two weeks ago backdated to 1 October, she went straight out and recruited three new members.

In spite of home commitments and awkward duty hours, the attendance of women at union meetings has been very encouraging. We, the women, fought for and got a supper break, which had not previously existed. We got free transport laid on for Sundays and in the last couple of weeks we secured transport for our supper break (the hospital is spread over a vast area). We have consistently argued with the management that the best guarantee of the welfare of the patients is the welfare of the staff.

At the moment we are engaged in balloting our members on whether we should support our brothers and sisters in NUPE, the National Union of Public Employees, with strike action when they demand their £4 a week rise on their miserable basic wage of £14.40 a week. A victory for the hospital workers is necessary at this time in order to beat this anti-working class government and their iniquitous wage freeze. We will be pushing for sympathy action.

Although we nurses do receive equal pay, hospital ancillary workers do not, and we must help them fight for this basic demand and we must link up to demand support from the TUC for the 35 hour week. We must demand that the TUC lead the whole labour movement in a struggle for a national minimum take home pay of £10 a 35 hour week, equal pay and job opportunities for all, and full pension.

# STRIKE WHILE THE FREEZE IS GOLD

In January the results of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) ballot showed that over 50 per cent of hospital members were prepared to take all out strike action and 80 per cent were prepared for some form of action against management's refusal to make an offer on the union's £4 claim.

This militancy is totally unparalleled in the hospital service where the management have employed what they regard as the most docile group of workers, women, youth and immigrants, whilst using their traditional lack of organisation to ensure that they are not paid the rate for the job. Here are some comparative wages to prove it:

Hospital Cook, male	£19.80
female	£16.88
BOAC Caterer	£30.00
Domestic Assistant, Hospitals (female)	£14.56
Fords (lowest UK car rates)	£29.00
Porters/Janitors	
Hospitals	£17.48
Chrysler (UK)	£32.80
Stoker	
Hospitals	£18.56
Chrysler (UK)	£38.60

(Figures from Backlash No 3)

Hospital workers have already shown on their strikes and demonstrations that they are no longer prepared to tolerate this disgusting situation and are ready to link forces to smash the Tory wage freeze over their official claim for £4, a 35 hour week, equal pay for women and a month's holidays linked with lead-in payments of £1 for bonus schemes yet to be introduced and some form of threshold agreement.

Quite an impressive package and worth suffering a bit of hardship to win. But let's look again at the package both as a whole and at some of the items in it.

The figure of £4 will only restore the purchasing power of our wages in 1970. This claim would do nothing to get us out of the poverty trap since with £4 extra wages a week many of us would face cuts in supplementary benefits, rent rebates etc and increases in income tax. Also this figure does not take into account the rapid rise in the cost of living caused by entry into the Common Market, the introduction of VAT and the Tories Housing Finance Act. All these have caused rocketing food prices and rent rises, and lower paid workers spend the bulk of the income on these essentials. Since autumn, food prices have risen more rapidly than ever so that a £4 claim would already be out of date.

Because of this, many hospital workers are demanding a rise of £8, as proposed by the National Alliance of Stewards for Health (NASH)—not a breakaway union, but an organisation whose members include branch secretaries and shop stewards from all health unions. A rise of £8 would certainly bring us nearer to getting a decent standard of living so it is the duty of all health workers to push for this claim to be fought for by our union representatives on the Ancillary Staffs Council.

Equal pay and opportunity for women is an absolute must. For too long the management have been trying to play off women workers against men workers by different job descriptions and different rates.

So women ancillary workers and nurses must work together in the unions and support each other in struggle to end the situation where they are both at the bottom of the lowest pay scale and to improve their working conditions. Too many unions use the demand 'equal pay' as a bargaining counter with no intention of fulfilling it—we must make sure they do!

We should also be cynical about lead-in payments for bonus incentive schemes since these cut down the work force and make everyone else do two or three people's jobs to make up for them, for a few quid a week more. Bonus schemes again are a means of running away from the fact that we need a

decent increase in our basic.

So let's face it, we must all put all our energy into taking action, not just to beat the freeze to maintain our present standard of living on the basis of the money we were getting over two years ago, but to actually improve it. This means that we must demand at least £8 for a 35 hour week with equal pay for women. This must be done through our unions. To make our unions an effective fighting force we must have shop stewards in every department at work to make sure that women workers have the same voice as male workers and also to ensure 100 per cent unionism in our hospitals. Union meetings should be held during work time where possible so that women workers don't face the choice of making the family's tea or going to a union meeting.

And remember, when we come out on strike, the daily papers will be yelling hysterically about how our action is forcing people to suffer. Our reply to that is that we've been suffering over the years on account of our weekly pittance, how the whole working class is suffering because of the Tory freeze on wages while prices and profits rocket, our patients have suffered all the time up till now due to our low wages. Through being forced to work overtime, we're often too shattered to look after them the way they need and also because the turnover in our industry is so high that people often never even get the hang of the job before they leave for better money elsewhere.

So we must get the support of all other workers in our fight against the freeze and low wages which is also a fight for a better health service from the patients' point of view.

**Graham Jones, Member NUPE in a London hospital.**

*The problems of the National Health Service will not be overcome until all groups of workers employed in it, unite and fight them together. It is still very much the case that divisions prevent patients, Health Service workers, and all trade unionists from seeing the generalised situation—the fact that the Tory government (and Labour before them) is attacking US ALL by cutting public service costs to retain profit levels. We are losing our Health Service, inadequate as it already is. We women are more aware of the results of such cuts because we and our children have to use the service most. We are therefore in a good position to ensure that the whole 'public', especially the trade union movement, knows the dangers. In Italy there have been mass strikes against cuts in the social services.*

*We must demand a massive amount of money for the NHS, and we must publicise the need for committees of local people (who are all potential patients), nurses, doctors, porters, cleaners, maintenance etc. They would look after the day to day running of the service, appoint staff, and investigate complaints . . . in public. They should have powers to co-opt people with specialist knowledge. This could be co-ordinated by a central body, made up of potential patients and experts, who could plan for future needs, and direct research.*

*The struggle to effectively control the top doctors and the faceless men who run the Health Service, with our money, will not be won until working class people have an effective say in all aspects of society. Therefore the battle to save and expand the NHS can only be won as part of the struggle of working people towards a socialist society.*

*It is often said that 'money can't buy good health'. The fact is that it can—but in our society only the few have enough money to buy it. People die every year of sheer inadequacies in our Health Service. With enough money, and a proper regard for patients, this disease is curable. What is needed is action—not by politicians, but by people who work in the Health Service, and people who use it. As a start, form health service 'consumer groups' in your area, join the ancillary workers picket lines next time they strike (they will have to), discuss the problems in all trade union branches and press them for support.*

**HANDS OFF OUR HEALTH SERVICE**

# UNITE & FIGHT

## Housewives Demonstrate

Reports from Fareham, Reading and Southampton

### FAREHAM

*'No matter what government we have, they seem to think that housewives are the ones that should be given false promises to get them into power, then exploited while they're in power.'* Mrs Ritter, speaker at Fareham prices demonstration.

On Tuesday 6 February, 80 housewives, many with young children, demonstrated against rising food prices in the high street of Fareham (Hampshire). With placards like 'Food is a Luxury', 'Housewives say now come offit, Who is making all the profit', and 'Prices drop or wage freeze off', they paraded to the cheers and claps of many of the women workers in the local shops. A speaker before the march blamed the manufacturers and the government for price rises and demanded a *real* price freeze.

This was the first appearance of a campaign against price rises begun by three local women, who had met for the first time in a supermarket a week earlier. They were all fed up with housewives and their families having to eat low quality food and less meat because of the recent price rises but realised that grumbling amongst themselves or to the shop keepers wouldn't bring prices down. So they arranged to visit as many houses as possible to persuade women to demonstrate their opposition to price rises. This was to be the first step in a campaign which included a boycott of shops once a month, together with further bigger marches.

The local newspaper was initially very friendly. But as soon as the demonstration looked like being successful their tone changed. In an editorial they admonished the protesters for 'leaving many old folk out on a limb', and complained that a successful boycott 'would make shopping a misery for all'. Not a word about the misery of normal shopping for many housewives and pensioners who can't afford to buy decent quality food!

However the publicity brought many women to the march who otherwise wouldn't have known of it. One old age pensioner, her daughter and baby grand-daughter came 10 miles to protest about pensioners having to eat 'a hard boiled egg or a bowl of soup for Sunday dinner'—and with food prices rocketing, they'd soon have even less! 'A chop is now an unknown luxury', she said.

Southern TV filmed an interview with a Tesco store manager 'to put the other point of view'. He was all sympathy and pleasantness when faced with the angry women. However, he thought that no one could accuse his store of contributing to price rises. He was told of Tesco coffee which had risen 5p for 4oz jar the previous week. First he denied it, then claimed it was because manufacturers had to pay more because the countries that sell the coffee were demanding more. However, his Tesco coffee had risen in price *before* the new manufacturers' rise was announced! So then he just ignored the questioner!

### READING

On the same day in Reading the protest took the form of a boycott of all shops for one day, especially the large supermarkets. Mrs Pankhurst, of Clayton Walk, Reading and her sister were mainly responsible for its organisation. 700 leaflets were printed to publicise the boycott. Altogether 60 women were involved in organising the campaign.

What Mrs Pankhurst mainly objects to is the blatant profiteering by the supermarkets during the present 'price freeze'. She is now at work collecting signatures for a petition to be taken to London and handed in at the House of Commons. Mrs Pankhurst, like many housewives also has a part-time job, and objects strongly to being told that she should buy cheaper food, while rents are rising, wages are frozen, and the 'price freeze' continues to be a fraud.

### SOUTHAMPTON

Over 100 women marched through Totton, near Southampton, on 6 February, protesting against rising prices. The march and boycott was organised by a group of seven women to coincide with other marches and boycotts around the country.

'UNITE AND FIGHT' was one slogan, and all the women agreed that their husbands supported them completely. They felt that many more would come next time, and that women were now becoming more active in fighting for their rights.

These demonstrations show that housewives are beginning to fight back against a government that freezes wages but allows prices to rise, however we must be aware of the problems involved in any price campaign.

Housewives are economically powerless, being dependent on their husband's wage. In any real fight against rising prices we need to involve those who work in factories who can hit the manufacturers where it hurts—in their profits. A price campaign needs to link up with trade unionists—perhaps with women at work, many of whom are all too aware of the shrinking value of their pay packets. An approach could also be made to the local Trades Council.

A boycott of the shops one day a month, or more often, simply means women have to shop the day before or the day after and doesn't hurt the shopkeepers' or the manufacturers' profits. Consumers have no power in our society—the only effective boycott would be a total one all over the country and then we'd just all starve! Prices are mainly controlled by the big firms, so boycotting individual shopkeepers won't bring them down.

Whilst these demonstrations are a marvellous public opening to a prices campaign, bringing many women together for the first time, it is necessary to spread a fight against rising prices to a fight for full wage increases to cover the higher prices.



# Marion Robin, 69 and still fighting

Marion Robin is an old age pensioner aged 69, living in Islington, North London. Because her pension is not enough to live on, if she wants to stay warm, Marion is forced out to work at a large supermarket, which has over a hundred branches throughout the country. She can only work part-time from 12 til 4, the busiest times for the supermarket, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and for that she gets the princely sum of 40p an hour—£6.46 per week. Her pension is £6.24—normally it would be £6.75, but during the war, Marion was ill, failed to send in her certificates for four weeks, and when she became pensionable in 1960 she had to go before a tribunal where she was told she would be penalised for the rest of her life. She offered to pay the arrears, and was bluntly told 'No'. And so, for the remaining years of her working life Marion will be 51p worse off than other old age pensioners who work.

The supermarket where Marion works is non-unionised, although there are 100 staff employed. It is one of a chain, run cheaply because most of the staff are women and part-timers. Marion describes her job as 'the Jack of all Trades'. She goes from counter to counter serving anyone. If goods need unpacking she does that, and tickets them, in between running across the floor to help another customer with chinaware, clothes etc. Conditions at this supermarket are appalling. Full-time workers get only half an hour for lunch, and the canteen is on the same floor, right next door to the toilets which are more often than not inadequately equipped. Overalls get passed down from worker to worker and there is no laundry service supplied, so the women have to take their overalls home to wash.

Schoolgirls, coming straight from school, work from 4.30 til 8 on a Friday, often lifting weights too heavy even for the older women. They are paid what Marion considers a scandalous rate—20p an hour! and nobody gets concessions—all staff have to buy just like the customers which is a pretty mean set up when you consider that the owner of the Green Shield Trading Stamp Co which has its finger in most supermarkets, takes home £1313 a week—*more than the shopgirls earn in a year!*

Apathy is not one of Marion's characteristics. Since she has been working she has been to the Union of Shop Distributive & Allied Workers (USDAW) in an attempt to unionise her workplace. She was interviewed by a doorman who told her that USDAW left it to people themselves to organise. The union representatives she later saw gave no answer so Marion asked them to a meeting at her home where she had friends to support her. All she got from these union reps was some membership forms, and the question—would *she* try to get people into the union? When Marion mentioned that she thought that was *their* job, they made excuses that it was getting near to Christmas, and that supermarkets had a high turnover of staff at that time so it made things very difficult in terms of recruiting members.

Of course, what they really meant was that it wasn't worth their while—it isn't the first time trade unions have not been enthusiastic in recruiting women—the nightcleaners fight has been a long hard fight for recognition by the TGWU.

I asked Marion what effect she thought the Womens Lib movement had had upon women beginning to organise into trade unions. She seemed to think that there were plenty of opportunities working around issues such as Equal Pay, conditions of work etc, but that the movement hadn't yet made this breakthrough. 'People have *got* to fight,' she said, 'but the trouble is, in places like mine, widows with kids, older people like me who are part-timers, can't afford to lose their jobs so they don't fight. Womens Lib could do a great job here! I'm so happy about the birth of it.'

Marion's history is a militant one. She has consistently fought against evictions with other working class families, and in defence of her rights (poor as they are) as an old age pensioner. Her own eviction in 1966 is one particular example of her strength and courage.

'I was paying £3.50 for a bedsitter in a real slum—no cooking facilities, no bathroom in the house. We had no rent books, and no receipt for the rent we paid. I finally went to the rent tribunal to get my rent lowered.' The landlady guessed she was going to the tribunal and gave Marion notice to quit under her door, *backdated 14 days before she went to the tribunal.* She

also sent her 'stooges' as Marion calls them, in the guise of workmen, who took her fireplace away and cut off her gas and electricity. At the time Marion had chronic bronchitis, but she battled on, despite the doctor's comments that he didn't like tending his patients by candlelight without heating!

Marion won her case, and had three months protection of tenancy, her rent being lowered to £1.05. 'I suffered,' she said, 'but I felt that it was all to a good end, because by the time we finished with this landlady every room in every house that she owned (15 in all)—we had it assessed by the rent tribunals, rent officers, courts, town halls. We really put her on the mat.'

Now, in 1973 Marion lives in a block of flats for old and sick people. They are only given a rebate on these tenancies if they can claim an income small enough, 'Which is a means test under this Tory government and no one can tell me otherwise.

They want to know who's your employer, nature of your work and what your wages are before they'll give you a rebate.' The rent for the flat was £6.71 and now with her rebate it is £3.21 per week. But for this, Marion has to put up with a radiator which has once flooded her home, and which rumbles continually so that she is forced to switch it off if she wants to talk. 'The day I'm at home, I'm really cold. I have to wear my winter boots and coat and open the oven door for heat—which proves very expensive.'

But Marion has no illusions in either the Tory or Labour governments. She has fought against both councils, for allowing the multi-millionaire property prospectors to move into Islington and terrorise people out of their homes in order to make huge profits from vacant possession. She makes it her business to knock on the doors of houses with the property prospector's boards outside and advise the tenants to form themselves into federations to *fight* their evictions instead of sitting back and accepting the corruption and injustice that this society metes out to working people.

Marion Robin is a fine example to working women of all ages. Throughout her life she has been in trade unions fighting alongside other workers, and where there has been no union, as in her present job, she has begun the long struggle for herself and the other women to get one!

One can be sure that when the shopworkers begin to take action for higher wages in the same way as the hospital workers and other low paid sections of the working class, Marion Robin will be one old age pensioner who is right out in the front.

Jacquy Hayman

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## The Big Red Herring

Valerie Clark

'It has become quite fashionable with people who occupy themselves with the social question to consider the question of population as the most important and burning of all. They claim that we are threatened with "over-population"—aye, the danger is upon us . . . The fear of over-population is very old. It was touched upon in connection with the social conditions of the Greeks and Romans, and at the close of the Middle Ages. The fear turns up again at periods when the existing social conditions are disintegrating and breaking down.'

This quote, which could be from today's newspaper, comes in fact from August Bebel's book 'Women under Socialism' and was written in 1883. So when we hear the cry 'over-population', this is nothing new. But are our social problems caused by too many people? Or are they caused, as Bebel and other socialists believe, by an unequal distribution of wealth?

In the time of Elizabeth the First, it is estimated there were only about three million people living in England—plenty of room! Elizabeth lived in a grand style, but a very large proportion of the people lacked the basic comforts of life, and hunger, poverty and disease were widespread. Today there are over 50 million people, and although hardship and squalor still exist,

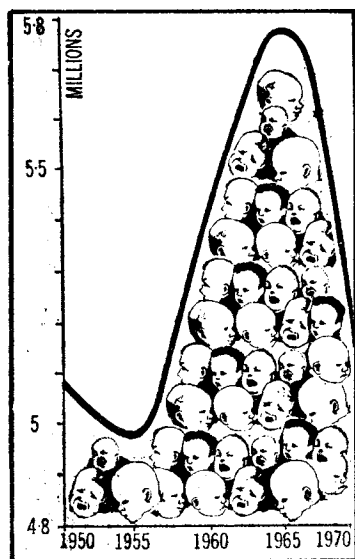
there is no doubt that the standard of living for the average family is much higher than it was 400 years ago. Why is this? It is true, of course, that Britain has benefitted by exploiting the natural resources of the underdeveloped countries. *But the main point is that the question of poverty or plenty does not only depend on how many people there are to the square mile. It also depends on how much the society as a whole produces, and how that wealth is distributed among the people.*

The amount of food, raw materials and goods produced by the world is not something that remains static. It depends on how much scientific and technical knowledge we have. There is now a real possibility of providing a decent standard of living for everyone on earth. But the poverty in our midst is caused by the fact that under the capitalist system the wealth of the world is not shared out fairly.

When listening to the population doomsters, it is important to bear two little-publicised facts in mind. All surveys done in Britain on the causes of poverty recently show that the single greatest cause of poverty is *low wages*, not large families (most families living below the poverty line have two children or less). Secondly, the birth rate in Britain has been *declining* for the past hundred years apart from occasional 'baby booms', the most recent being just after the war and again in 1964.

### Hypocrisy

Organisations like *Population Stabilisation* prattle on about 'legislation to control population' but they have not thought seriously about what this means. It does not mean *persuading* people to have smaller families, but of *forcing* them to. And *who* is going to have the power to say which people can have children and how many? We recently had the irritating example of the Queen's husband, father of four, telling the rest of us that it is 'irresponsible' for anyone to have more than two children. This sort of hypocrisy makes it clear that when the rich and powerful talk about limiting the size of families, they don't mean that any of the rules should apply to them. It would only be working class people who would be given instructions on their sex life.



from the Sunday Times

Those who try to dodge the issue say people would be 'discouraged' if they didn't get tax relief or family allowances. This is nonsense—and they know it. Taking away welfare or tax benefits would simply result in poor health for mothers and children, and an increase in the number of babies dying early in life. But it would not drastically reduce the number of large families. Most large families are not so much a matter of planning, but of *failing* to plan (often through lack of contraceptive knowledge, or for religious reasons). No, if you take 'population control' to its logical conclusion, there is only one way the state can *control* population. That is by resorting to methods which are an intolerable intrusion on the most intimate areas of our lives. Anyway, such methods could only work if they were carried out widely and indiscriminately, like mass compulsory sterilisation.

Free contraception and abortion should be available to all women. But we demand this so that every woman has the means to make her own choice about whether she wants a baby. The state does not have the right to make that choice for her.

### Less Children

But the doomsters have a point. Population is not a question to be completely ignored. What is interesting is that people tend to have less children as they achieve a higher standard of living. There are several theories as to why this happens. It may be because people realise that a drop in living standards occurs with the birth of another child, and therefore do try to plan whether or not to have one. Or the belief that with a smaller family it is easier to pass on to your children the benefits of the good life you have built. *There is also a growing awareness among women that child-bearing is not their sole purpose in life.*

At the turn of the century, working class women spent 15 years of their lives either pregnant or nursing babies. Nowadays the average woman spends only four years of her life in this way, and she can also expect to live longer. Voluntarily limiting the size of the family increases the opportunities of the mother to live a life of her own, and for the family as a whole to enjoy the better things in life—holidays, comfortable home, leisure activities.

We do not believe family size should be imposed by legal force, but should be influenced by the decisions of *all* women and men. The only acceptable way is by achieving a higher standard of living, by better general and sex education, a wider use of contraception on a voluntary basis, and changes in attitude to motherhood and the family.

The last will be the most difficult. It means undermining the whole idea that motherhood is what *every* woman should strive for, that *only* childbearing gives a woman's life any meaning. We should no longer consider the childless couple to be odd or selfish, or the woman who doesn't want children to be unnatural or sex-less. A large number of women when forced to be truthful, at times of illness, mental stress or family breakdown, admit they never wanted any children. As one mother said, 'They'd just made me think it would be so easy and lovely and most of all that I *had* to do it, that there was something wrong with me if I didn't. I'd never thought that I had any choice.' If women's lives were full of other opportunities, so there *was* a real choice about how we spent our lives, many more women would opt for a small family or no children at all (so would their men).

But we are not going to achieve these things under capitalism where decisions are made by a tiny group in their own interests. We can expect the 'over-population' red herring to be dragged across our path again and again. This government will continue to spend £200 million a year on 'defence' rather than build homes or give women free family planning; and at the same time they'll blame the housing shortage on 'increasing demand'. The changes we want will only take place when we use the wealth of the world to satisfy people's real needs, and when power is in the hands of the working people to use for the benefit of us all.

## CLAY CROSS the real test

*Clay Cross is now the only Labour Council in England holding out against the Tory Housing Finance Act. Because of their refusal to raise the tenants' rents the 11 councillors have each been surcharged £653 and face disqualification from the council and further fines. However, the local community hasn't taken this attack on their council lying down. A spontaneous rent strike broke out when the District Auditors decision was announced, and this has now become a total rents and rates strike.*

*The Council, in its turn, has now decided to stop paying interest payments for its houses and is withholding a £20,000 payment. The Clay Cross Council and Labour Party have had no help at all from the Labour Party nationally, indeed its National Executive is now investigating the local Party because it has dared to remove councillors who refused to support the tenants.*

*It is clear that if every Labour Council had behaved like Clay Cross the Tories could never have got their rent rises. Most of them are too interested in retaining their positions and 'respecting the law'. Now it is up to the tenants to fight! Thousands of them are already doing so and are on rent strike all over the country. Faced with further rent rises of 50p and massive rate*

*rises many more will join them this year. In every area women, as the rent payers, are to the forefront of the struggle. We must build many more areas like CLAY CROSS!*

*Iris Miller and Maggie Symonds went to Clay Cross recently and talked to some of the women who live there:*

'There's nothing but roads in Clay Cross, where the children can play,' said Carol Boyd. Mother of a young baby, she was, for the fifth consecutive day, standing on picket duty outside the local council offices and holding a banner which declared: CLAY CROSS WILL NOT PAY. The local councillors claim national attention and collect the accolades of the left-wing press for their adamant refusal to implement the Housing Finance Act, but the local women are just as defiant.

A stroll around this north-east Derbyshire town is enough to confirm Carol Boyd's comment about amenities for children. Clay Cross stands amidst a bleak, decaying industrial landscape; the unemployment rate is 17 per cent; those houses which are not council-owned are mostly terraced. There is a sense of physical depression about the place—and yet the spirit is indomitable. Indeed, you feel that if ever the fighting class-consciousness of this town was to break, then the whole place would fall to pieces.

Violet Broomhall, Carol's regular companion on sentry-go (eight hours or more each day), is married to a miner who works at the Ireland pit—one of the few still open in the area. Neighbours and friends look after her six children while she is picketing the council offices. She wants to get more housewives involved in the fight against the Rent Act, and to go on from that—to get permanently organised to fight for their own interests in the area. This sentiment was echoed by Carol: 'Women are isolated, they need somewhere to meet. After rents we want to fight for playgroups and playing facilities.'

Mrs Broomhall sees the Act as designed to divide families: 'How could you treat your son as a lodger and make him pay rent? It's ridiculous to treat your children earning a wage as lodgers.' Violet and Carol are both firmly convinced that the solidarity of housewives is essential if this rent rise is to be defeated. The extra money cannot be found, they maintain. 'It's ridiculous,' said Carol, 'we just can't afford to pay it.' They are going to spend their rent money on a holiday for the children. 'The council have told us not to pay and we are not going to pay.'

Sharon Nix, a sixth-former who sells 'Rebel' at school and in the local area, said: 'The battle against the rent rise must be fought by the young people as well; they are the future tenants.' Sharon is active in getting a new Young Socialist Society off the ground. Her mother was convinced that 'if women ran the country there'd be a lot of drastic changes—for the better—I'm telling you!'

'For instance,' put in Sharon, 'the only playground for children here has sparse facilities and most of the playing equipment is out of order.'

Mrs Eileen Wholey is the only woman councillor in Clay Cross. A canteen cook at a local school, she has been active in her union branch (NUPE) for many years and has served for over a decade on the council—where she holds the position of secretary. 'The housewife is coming forward in the rent struggle,' she said, 'they are getting organised. The rent rise is bound to hit the housewife fiercely—the extra £1 will come off the table.'

An outcome of tenants working together on the rents issue could be a Housewives Association, she feels. Women easily become isolated, but now that they are involved in co-operative struggle they will wish to go on—fighting against price rises, maintaining boycotts, demanding more amenities, nurseries and playgrounds. At present there is no effective organisation for women in Clay Cross, but the fight against the Rent Act may well provide the impetus for future activity. But why is there only one woman on the council? 'I don't know,' said Mrs Wholey, 'but if we go (are disenfranchised) there will be more women coming up.'

Eileen Wholey is prepared to go to gaol for her part in the council's defiance of the Housing Finance Act, but admits that now it is largely 'up to the tenants to fight against the rises,' and women, able to form the most cohesive force on the estates, must play a significant role in this fight.

## Review:

# Women Fight Back

**Carol Smith (Harlow Women Workers Group, ETU)**

Kath Ennis's pamphlet, 'Women Fight Back', raises an interesting question—are women to fight for their basic rights independently or are they to enlist the help of their men, and obtain their ideas by joining the battle for socialism and the benefit of the entire working class? I find my sympathies lie with her in her conclusion that it must be a combined effort. It is true that women are badly treated at work, and at home, and that most positions of authority are held by men, but as we are told in the pamphlet, the working man is also held down and poorly dealt with by the bosses of his own sex.

The first section deals with the lives that women lead today, in the home, at work, and in relation to their families. It shows why the advent of the Women's Liberation Movement spelt hope to millions of disillusioned people. Thoughts which have been stirring deep down for years are now being expressed, in spite of the efforts of the media to ridicule. The arguments for and against equal pay are explained, and reassurance given to women who do not want to jeopardise their husbands' prospects by improving their own. The statistics we are given are very informative, and could be of great value as ammunition when we are arguing the case for equal pay.

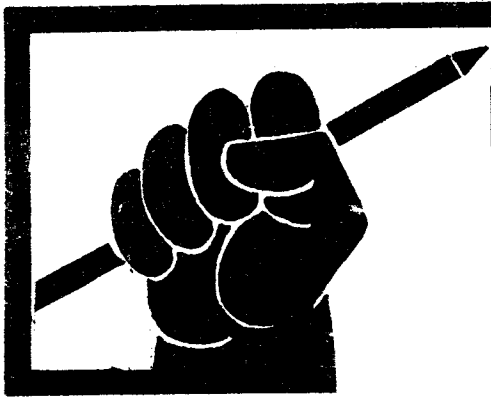
I did feel, on reading the paragraphs entitled 'Women in the Future' that Kath Ennis was being a bit idealistic. Some women do enjoy housework for its own sake, (and why should they not continue to do so?) although many of us, myself included, only perform the function because society in its present form demands it. I do not see that free restaurants could ever be a practical possibility or that women should ever become completely independent of men. Why should a man not bear some sort of responsibility toward the child he has fathered?

The answer to the problem of women being used as a vast pool of cheap, exploited labour to boost profits for the ruling class is, I think, rightly given in this pamphlet as the greater participation of women in union affairs. The Trade Unions themselves are at fault in many ways, but with sufficient agitation from the female labour on the shop floor, this too can be changed. We are given several examples in 'Women Fight Back' of women who have fought back, and it is encouraging to read of the battles they have won. Each victory against the blatant and unreasonable discrimination in this country makes the next one that much easier, and if women are prepared to unite, and put up with the initial inevitable hostility, the women's movement could gain a momentum that would be difficult to overcome.

Ever since this pamphlet was written, women have been made more aware of the rising cost of living. They see the prices going up day by day in the shops, and it is the wives and mothers who are faced with the agonising decisions about which necessities are more necessary than others. No woman wants to see her husband or child without good, wholesome food or decent clothing and shoes, but neither does she want to have to badger her husband for more money out of his frozen wage packet, when she knows that the rent has gone up, together with the fuel bills, and he has to find these extra expenses as well. Every woman knows in her heart that she and her family have the right to a secure roof over their heads at a reasonable rent, and adequate food and clothing—she does not need a pamphlet to tell her that—but she does need one to tell her what the answer is to her dilemma. The solution does not lie with the Tory Party, nor, I am sorry to say, with the Labour Party, but in a concerted effort by the whole working class—men and women—against the forces that are pushing them down.

The woman has a special part to play in all this, and it is time that she stirred herself into action, expressing all the feelings that have been suppressed for so long.

The message of 'Women Fight Back' is that we can have equal pay, we can have a decent standard of living, we can have free contraception, and we can have free nursery places for our children. For anyone who is ready to enter the battle which affects every working class woman in this country, a read of Kath Ennis's pamphlet is a very good start.



# LETTERS

## How we fight racialism

We are grateful to the Birmingham comrades for their letter to the last issue correcting the facts on the building strike.

However, it is *not* the case that the International Socialists believe such a deep-rooted problem as racialism can be overcome simply by joint action of black and white workers on the wages question. Women's Voice was making the point, which the Birmingham correspondents seem to agree with, that '*some* people very quickly realise that the enemy is not the black worker next to you—it's the boss who's making money out of you both.' (Women's Voice No 3, Editorial)

The Birmingham comrades stress that the question must be 'fought politically'. We believe that it *is* fighting politically to make the subject an editorial in our women's paper to counter the racist propaganda to which so many women are susceptible. Women's Voice must continually point out that racialism is against the interests of all working people, that any divisions between us, black and white, as between men and women, prevent us from locating our real enemy—the capitalist system. It is also essential to publicise and explain the struggles of black people (see the article on Asian women at Mansfield Hosiery mills in the last issue) so that more white working class people will understand and support them.

We do not think there is a more effective way of fighting racialism than by persistently taking up the issue in the factories and offices, on the estates and in the community. No socialist would be so naive as to think that militancy alone can defeat racialism. But in the Birmingham comrades' letter is another danger we must avoid—that of making a false division between 'politics' and the way we fight for our ideas in day-to-day life.

**Stella Cawood and Valerie Clark,  
Huddersfield.**

## The baby business

Dear Womans Voice,  
As the mother of a small baby, I was interested to read Anna Kerr's article, 'Motherhood, the Hard Sell'. I would like to add some comments on another aspect of the Baby Business—namely present day habits of feeding infants.

30 years ago most babies were breast-fed and the recommended age for weaning onto solids was 6-9 months. This meant that feeding a baby cost very little, especially when the solid food was prepared at home.

Nowadays things are very different. In a recent survey reported in the British Medical Journal, of babies attending a welfare clinic, only 10 per cent were breast-fed and by the age of 13 weeks 93 per cent were on some form of solid food, usually specially prepared baby-food. This is the accepted way of feeding and most mothers say their babies thrive on it.

Giving babies solid food, however, increases their calorie intake—which tends to make them overweight. In fact 44 per cent of the babies in the survey were overweight. Evidence indicates that overweight babies usually grow up into overweight adults, with all the problems, both physical and psychological that brings. The survey also found a high incidence of nappy rash, which may be due to the high intake of solid food.

Mothers are unaware of these possible side effects and why should anyone tell them when the baby food firms are making so much money? Any mother who breast-feeds is regarded as something of a rarity—and constantly told that if her baby is crying he must be hungry and be given a bottle. No wonder so many mothers don't bother at all. Ironically, one of the selling points for various kinds of dried milk is that it is the nearest thing to breast milk. Maybe we should start to promote breast feeding—after all it's easy to prepare and costs nothing!

Fraternally,  
**Christine Wilkin, Coventry.**

Dear Women's Voice,  
I am only too aware of the fact that I am a middle class woman in a society where women in my situation are not nearly aware enough of the working class woman. Women's Voice emphasises this all too clearly and this is a good thing but please do not make the mistake of alienating us because some of us want and can help in working towards a socialist future. We need to *work together* so that our daughters will not have to live in a society where this gap exists.

**Judith Attfield, Hoddesdon Herts.**

## Still second class citizens

Dear Woman's Voice,  
I have just read the Woman's Voice pamphlet, 'Women Fight Back', and it put into words so much that I've been thinking for many years.

Since my childhood, spent in the working class district of Bootle, Lancashire, in the 'hungry thirties' I have been aware and incensed by women's inferior role in society. Those were the days of mass unemployment, meagre wages and that horror of horrors the Means Test! While we didn't exactly starve, we often went hungry and my poor mother was often hard pressed to feed and clothe her six children. When my father was unemployed (as he frequently was) she had to resort to the pawn shop or the money lender. Sometimes she took in washing, doing a huge load for half a crown. Times were hard for men, but I noticed that it was the women who bore the brunt of it, and at the age of ten I was a confirmed feminist.

Women's lot is better today but we are still second class citizens, exploited by our husbands and employers alike. We are still a cheap form of labour and the Equal Pay Act is a farce—there are so many ways around it, most women won't receive it. Because women are overworked they take very little interest in unions, except when their back is against the wall, then they can be just as militant as men.

While I agree with most of the pamphlet, I don't agree that the Suffragette movement was completely middle class. I recently read a book called 'Hannah Mitchell, Rebel and Suffragette'. She worked in several sweat shops and was a pioneer of the Labour Movement as well as being a suffragette. Granted most of them came from wealthy backgrounds, but not all, and in any case they did a grand job!

Women have a long way to go before they achieve equal status with men, but the wheels are slowly turning. Women are indeed beginning to fight back and 'the hand that rocks the cradle could one day rule the World!'

**Jean Parkin, Beeston, Leeds.**

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# WOMEN FIGHT BACK



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